

STATE OF THE RIVER 2001

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RIVER PROFILE

Despite its name, the New River is the oldest river in North America. Geologists estimate that it is about 320 million years old, meaning it was already in place when the Appalachian Mountains were formed. The New flows north for over 250 miles as it originates in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina and snakes through mountains, rolling

hills and farmland in Virginia, and then on to the steep gorges of West Virginia's coal country. The New is the most rural of the fourteen American Heritage Rivers with population density averaging 50 people per square mile.

Traditional Southern Appalachian culture is predominant along the entire river, with a strong emphasis on kinship, community and religion. Much of the land remains in agriculture -- row crops, tobacco, dairy and beef cattle and sheep -- with forestry, manufacturing and tourism also contributing to the regional economy. Small farms are common and local craftsmen turn out handmade paper, fabric, quilts and toys.

Natural areas are still relatively intact along much of the river. The region is home to a wide variety of wildlife and has developed a variety of recreational opportunities. Aside from hunting and fishing, these include kayaking, canoeing, bird-watching, camping and other outdoor activities. Communities along the New River are committed to maintaining traditional land uses, including agriculture, fishing, forestry, and recreation, while generating new economic activities to compensate for the long-term decline of employment in some occupations like coal mining.

When the New River was officially designated as one of the fourteen American Heritage Rivers on July 30, 1998, by the President and Vice-President of the United States in Ashe County, North Carolina, fifteen thousand people came out to celebrate in a field beside the river. This was only the beginning of the community effort. Within a few weeks, a new non-profit watershed organization, the New River Community Partners (NRCP) had been established to oversee and coordinate the implementation of the American Heritage Rivers Initiative (AHRI) for the New River. Their first act was to initiate a grassroots planning process to collect the community-based projects that would make up the New River Watershed Work Plan.



Community Project Priorities

Out of over 335 proposals for projects and action items which are listed in the New River Watershed Work Plan, 15 Major Project Initiatives have been identified for a higher priority focus:

- Ashe County Courthouse Renovation
- New River Sustainable Agriculture Initiative
- New River Hazard Mitigation Planning
- New River Reconnaissance Study
- The Todd Projects
- New River Blueway Project
- New River Collaborative -- Expansion to Watershed
- New River Americorps Project
- Rural Center Demonstration Project
- New River Curriculum Initiative
- Christiansburg Institute Project
- Sparta Surface Water Treatment Plant Project
- Mount Rogers Regional Water System Project
- NRCP and SEEDS (Seek Education, Explore, Discover)
- Collaboration with The Heinz Center

- America's River Communities -- Documentary Project

This identification of Initiatives combines many of the projects and action items that were listed separately in the work plan. No projects have been dropped from the over 335 that are listed in the work plan and more will be added as opportunities and support evolve.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND RESOURCES LEVERAGED

A major accomplishment for the NRCP has been the development of the New River Watershed Work Plan. This work plan is a living, working document, which changes frequently as projects are completed and new programs and projects are begun. One of the purposes of the planning process was to help local groups build partnerships across state and county lines. Therefore, many categories show very similar projects being undertaken in different places, a situation that invites regional cooperation and coordination.

The New River Watershed Work Plan is organized into six topic areas, each of which is divided into smaller categories that group similar projects from across the watershed. The six topic areas are the following:

- Historic and Cultural Preservation
- Education and Training
- Economic Revitalization
- Natural Resource Protection
- Agriculture
- Transportation and Trails



Although projects have been grouped into categories, all of them are linked and connected. Residents of the region understand that the land, the economy and the culture of the New River are closely intertwined. These connections are reflected in a multitude of projects that have economic, environmental, cultural and educational components. The work of our many partners throughout the watershed demonstrates these connections, as we have chambers of commerce involved in natural resource protection, agricultural services working on heritage preservation, and environmental groups assisting with economic development.

Resources leveraged by the NRCP is another major accomplishment. To date, over 13 million dollars has been leveraged from federal, state, local and private sources. Projects include sustainable agriculture, aquatic ecosystem restoration, all-hazard mitigation planning, sewer and water infrastructure, river access (blueways), riparian corridor planning and preservation (greenways), conservation easements, trails development, historic preservation, tourism, economic development and education.

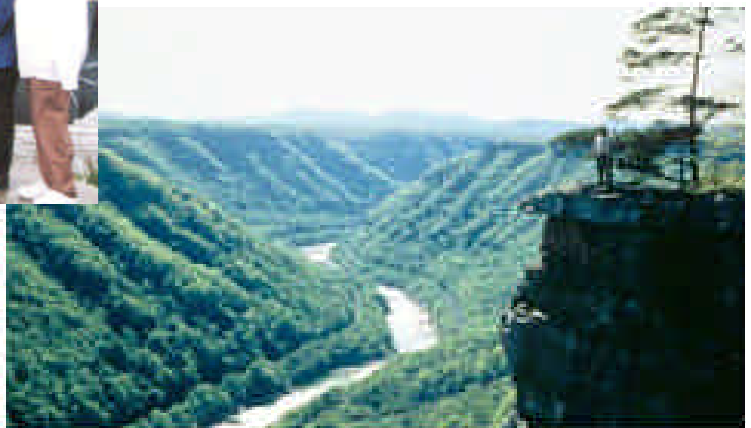
Considerable efforts have been made toward capacity-building in the watershed. Several workshops have been conducted or co-hosted by the NRCP to address a wide variety of needs. Some of the more popular topics include: grantsmanship, niche industry development, wastewater management, stream bank stabilization, communication, and agricultural interests. Numerous meetings have been held throughout the watershed with stakeholders and community partners to facilitate and build consensus, provide technical consultation, advise on sources for program and project information, provide funding source information, and offer support for new teaming efforts and partnerships. The NRCP hosts their own website (www.nrnp.org) and regularly updates information on the American Heritage Rivers homepage (www.epa.gov/rivers). Many newspaper, magazine and newsletter articles have been published, some of the more notable appearing in National Geographic and Blue Ridge Magazine.

Future Challenges

The NRCP and the AHRI have tremendous potential to impact and improve the

quality of life for those who live, work and visit in the New River Watershed. A solid network of energized community partners throughout the watershed are motivated to advance their projects and undertake new challenges. For the New River Community Partners to continue to be effective and reach their full potential, the following actions need to be taken over the next two years:

- Obtain administrative or capacity building support and funding for the NRCP in order to fulfill expectations of community partners, and to facilitate the unique partnerships required to deliver worthy projects.
- Continue to receive support from the US Army Corps of Engineers to sponsor and provide for the services of the New River Navigator.
- Continue to receive access to federal administrators and federal agencies to help communities pursue projects and opportunities relative to economic revitalization, natural resource protection and historic and cultural resource preservation, and
- Continue to receive support and priority from an AHR Task Force in Washington, D.C. or a comparable institutional structure.





New River Community Partners

P.O. Box 1897
Sparta, NC 28675

336-372-8118
336-372-8135 (fax)
pwoodie@skybest.com

NEW RIVER COMMUNITY PARTNERS

In keeping with the grassroots nature of the AHRI, NRCP's role is not to implement the over 335 projects listed in the New River Watershed Work Plan, but to provide support and assistance to the individuals and local and regional groups that planned them. This support takes the form of providing regional coordination with the River Navigator, helping create new partnerships, developing relationships with state and federal agencies, and other forms of training and technical assistance.

New River Community Partners' 25 member Board of Directors includes grassroots leaders, small business owners, elected officials, educators, chamber of commerce directors, landowners, natural resource management professionals, and historic preservationists from all three states. The Executive Director is Patrick Woodie, an Alleghany County, NC, resident whose leadership was instrumental in getting the New River its American Heritage River designation. The River Navigator is Ben Borda, a native West Virginian, who is sponsored by the Huntington District of the US Army Corps of Engineers.

A nine member Council of Advisors is in place to work with the Board of Directors regarding the needs of the New River Community Partners. The Council includes: Erskine Bowles (NC), Congressman Rick Boucher (VA), Congressman Nick Rahall (WV), Delegate Tom Jackson, Delegate Mary Pearl Compton, and Mrs. Cynthia Andrews.

